

LETTERS FROM KALIMANTAN

Judith M. Hudson

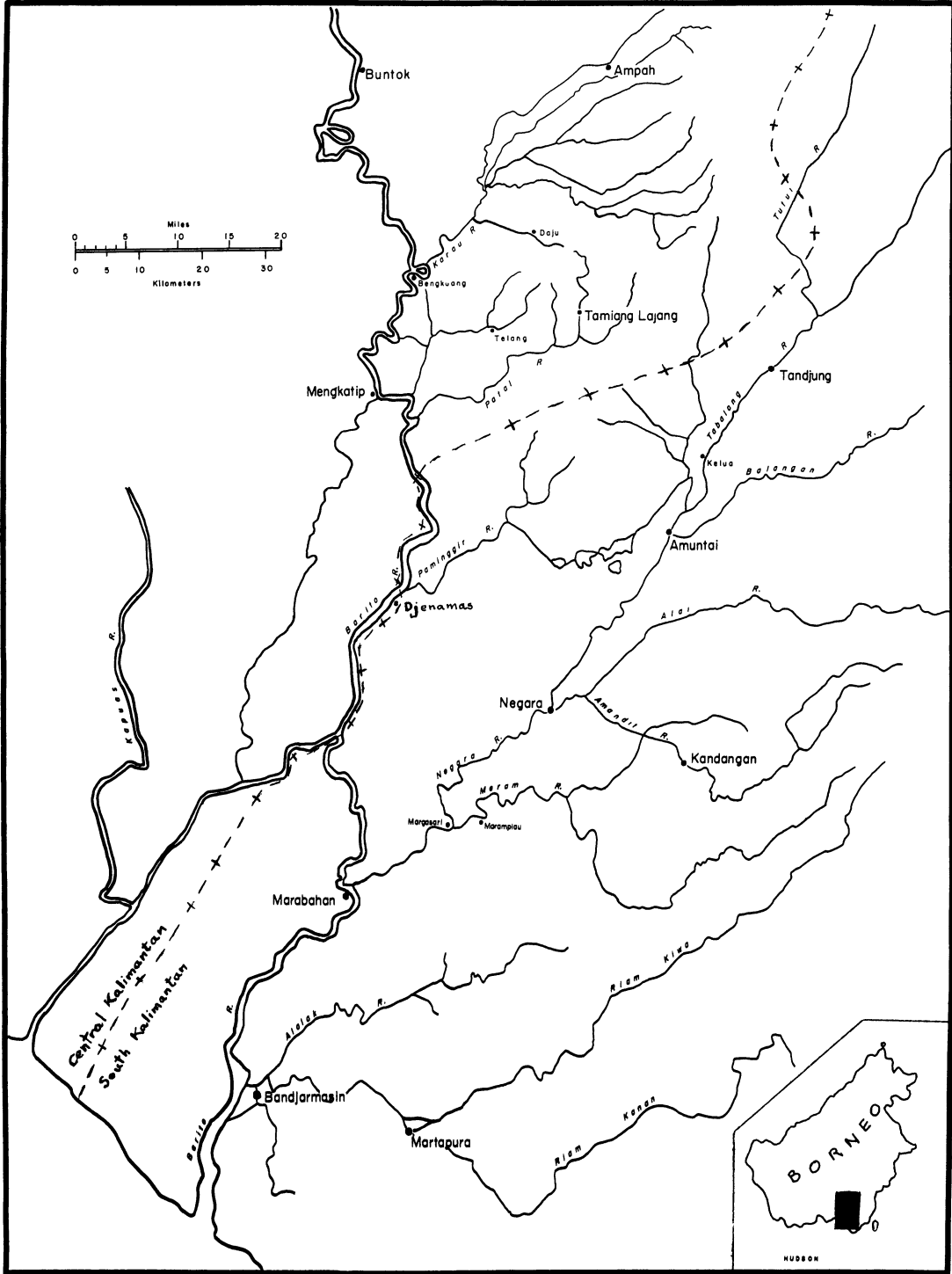
From January 1963 until May 1964, my husband and I lived in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), where we did anthropological research. The bulk of our time (April 1963-April 1964) was spent in the small village of Telang in the province of Central Kalimantan, where we collected ethnographic data on the Ma'anjan, a Dajak ethnic group. During the course of our stay in Kalimantan, I wrote a series of "letters home," in which I recorded our experiences and impressions in a more personal form than field notes could have provided. The following passages are excerpts from this "journal."

Bandjarmasin, 20 March 1963

On the 4th of March we finally managed to get away from Bandjarmasin on our first trip up into the Barito drainage. After returning on February 13th from a necessary but time-consuming visit to Palangka Raja, the capital of the province of Central Kalimantan, the vicissitudes of puasa (Ramadan) forced us to delay our upriver departure for an additional three weeks. The Bandjars are devout Moslems, and most of the river traffic, which is almost entirely in their hands now that the Chinese position in this sector has declined, comes to a halt during puasa.

We were not happy at the prospect of more delay, especially since the pleasant University mess where we had stayed prior to the Palangka Raja trip had been taken over by the Front Nasional as an office building. Our new quarters on a less centrally located sidestreet were rather cramped, and it was impossible for us to supplement the mess' meager fare because all Bandjarmasin's restaurants were closed during daylight hours for puasa.

We occupied ourselves collecting a few Dajak word lists and discussing the Telang area, that is to be our center of research, with various Ma'anjan friends. We also spent some time wandering about Bandjarmasin. The older part of the city is laid out along the banks of the Martapura River and its tributaries. A network of small canals formerly provided the only links between various parts of the city. For most of Bandjarmasin's population



these canals still serve as bathing facilities, and one always sees canoes transporting vegetables, large earthenware pots, and other goods by canal. Even now, some areas of the city are accessible only by water; the problem of constructing roads in such swampy terrain is considerable. The houses along the river, being built on piles or log floats, are protected from the tidal flooding that occurs in large sections of the city at full moon. The "modern" houses in some of the newer quarters of the city, however, are occasionally inundated by the rising water level that accompanies these flood tides.

On the evening of March 3rd, as we were visiting the night market, we were fortunate enough to meet Tjilik Riwut, the governor of Central Kalimantan, who offered us a spot in a provincial boat headed for Buntok, the administrative center of the Barito Selatan kabupatèn that is located about 150 miles up the river. The next afternoon, in the company of five others, we set off in a stempel, a very long, narrow craft powered by an outboard. The stempel travels at a good speed, riding close to the water so that one is constantly getting wet. For passengers, the quarters are relatively cramped, as one can neither stand nor move about. Often a stempel has no roof (though this one did), and thus one may also suffer from the intensely hot sun.

We travelled north from Bandjarmasin, up the muddy Barito which was one to two miles wide in most places.⁽¹⁾ Along the banks of the river's lower course we passed villages inhabited by Bandjars, who live primarily from fishing or from handsawing huge logs into planks. The river towns are all laid out parallel to one or the other bank of the river, about one or two houses deep. Consequently, even towns with a relatively small population are strung out for perhaps a mile or so, and take on an aspect of grandeur when viewed from a slowly passing boat. All the towns along the lower Barito are Moslem, and each has one or two mosques tucked away in the trees, some with quite ornate, though often unaesthetic, domes and spires. As we entered the Dajak area to the north, we began to notice Christian churches; many upriver towns with mixed Bandjar and Dajak populations have both mosques and churches. Along the river banks we saw small plots in which rice had been planted. These plots depend upon the annual monsoon flooding for irrigation, but such cultivation is risky, since the entire crop may be ruined by abnormally high flood waters.

Since it is dangerous to travel by stempel at night (one cannot see well enough to avoid the huge logs and other debris which float down the Barito), we planned to stop in Djenamas, the

(1) See Map 1: The Southeastern Barito Drainage.

first administrative post (ketjamatan) after entering the province of Central Kalimantan. Most of the town actually lies slightly to the south, in South Kalimantan territory. This small administrative outpost was recently established just across the Central Kalimantan side of the border, primarily to serve as a checkpoint for the collection of provincial duties on goods passing down the river.

Night falls suddenly here in the tropics, however, and we were still on the river after the sun dropped over the western tier of trees. Our stempel continued to pick its way through the darkness with the aid of a flashlight, wielded by a man in the bow. Occasionally the murky shapes of logs somewhat larger than the boat would slip by us, uncomfortably close, as they were carried downstream on the current. Eventually we arrived at Djenamas. The river was in full flood from the heavy monsoon rains, and as we moored the stempel to the raft that served as a boat landing, we could see water stretching into the darkness in all directions. A series of small rickety bridges had been constructed up to the porch of the house that served as the administrative center. We found our sense of balance barely adequate to keep us from tumbling into the water; Al was particularly plagued because the bridges tended to sink under his heavier weight, and he frequently teetered on the brink of baptism. Having reached the security of the porch, we entered the main room that served as both office and living room. Here we found the tjamat together with several of his assistants, clustered expectantly around a transistor radio. It was nearly time for the daily government transmission from Bandjarmasin. In the absence of telephone and telegraph links between many of Kalimantan's regions, provincial directives are relayed from Palangka Raja to Bandjarmasin by radio or land line and then transmitted each evening by the radio station in Bandjarmasin, addressed to the scattered government posts throughout Central Kalimantan. For most of the province's administrative posts, the daily government broadcast is their only direct, albeit one-way, link with the outside world.

We were cordially received by the tjamat, while his assistants put together an evening meal for us (the tjamat's wife and children lived upriver, because Djenamas had no schools as yet). The tjamat vacated his own bed for Al and myself, the rest of our party sleeping on mats on the floor. Officials who serve in posts on the Barito, it seems, must constantly extend hospitality to people who may arrive at any hour of night.

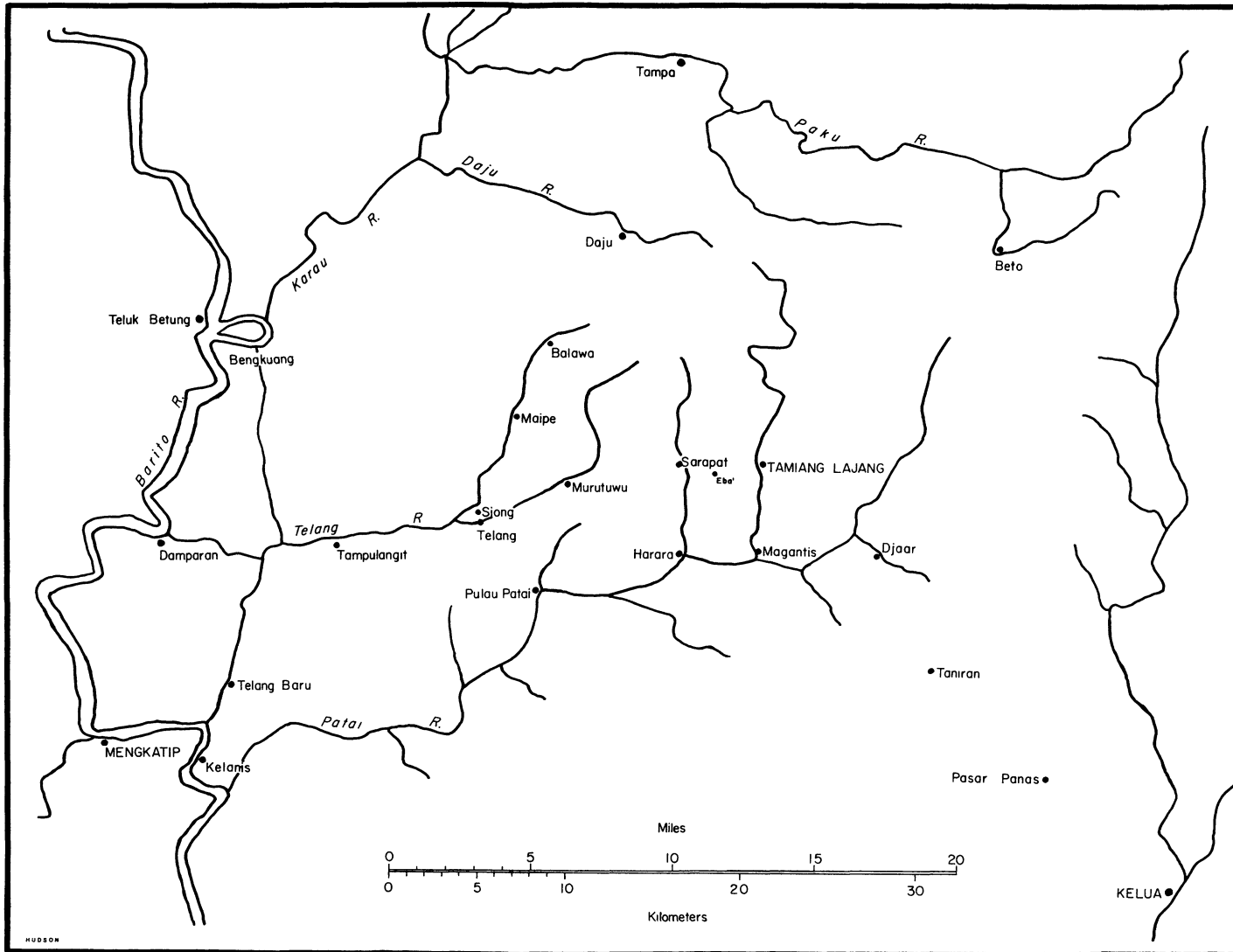
In the morning we started upriver once more.... Around four in the afternoon, we met another small boat headed downstream. Sitting crosslegged in the bow, wearing a pilot's helmet and a black leather jacket in the steaming heat of the day, was the bupati, the official we had expected to meet in Buntok. A revolver was conspicuously strapped to his side. A tense,

nervous man, he seemed more like a character from Wild West tales than a bureaucratic official. We stopped the stempels in mid-stream, and with the boats held together, Al presented our credentials. Since the bupati was not in Buntok, there was no reason for us to stay long in the kabupatèn capital. He told us to go along, spend the night in Buntok, meet the police and military officials in the morning and head back down river immediately, to make connections with him again in Mengkatip, whence transportation could be arranged to Tamiang Lajang, the next step downward in the administrative chain of command. As our boats parted at the conclusion of our mid-river consultation, the bupati exuberantly saluted us by discharging a round of pistol shots into the air.

Communications in Central Kalimantan are such, we learned, that senior administrative officers often lead a peripatetic existence, constantly travelling between their widely scattered outposts to keep tabs on their subordinates, inspecting lower administrative posts, auditing financial accounts, distributing funds and carrying the bureaucratic apparatus of government with them in the form of a group of haggard assistants. Men such as the bupati exhibit a truly amazing store of dynamic vitality as they move about their territories. It was fortunate indeed that we had met the bupati in midstream, for otherwise we might have spent a week or two in Buntok awaiting his return.

We spent only one night in Buntok. On the 6th of March, after having presented our credentials to the local police and military authorities and inspecting Buntok's periodic market, which wasn't in session during our visit, we were headed down-river by noon. Nightfall found us at the appointed spot of Mengkatip, but unfortunately, the bupati was not there yet. This situation set the stage for our introduction to the local version of indecision by consensus. Mengkatip is the seat of the wedana of Barito Barat and also of the tjamat of Dusun Hilir. When we arrived, the wedana, a native of Tamiang Lajang, was out hunting pig. However, the tjamat was around, and he didn't know what to do with us. He didn't know where the bupati was, and didn't think that he'd be coming to Mengkatip. Soon there were about twelve people gathered around discussing our case. This crowd included the boat driver, another passenger, the tjamat, and just about everyone else who happened to drop in for a minute. It was apparent that there were two opinions about the disposition of our case. The first, championed by the tjamat, said that it was ridiculous to go way over to Tamiang Lajang, when he himself could take us directly to Telang along the rivers Napu and Pupuken (Telang, of course, lies outside his jurisdiction in the ketjamatan of Dusun Timur, and is in an entirely different kewedanaan to boot).(2) This despite the fact that

(2) See Map 2: Telang and the surrounding Dusun Timur District.



both the governor and the bupati had told us to be sure to follow the administrative chain of command, which included stopping in Tamiang Lajang before going on to Telang. The other body of opinion thought that we should just sit and wait until sooner or later the bupati showed up and could express his will on the subject. It was obviously a futile argument, but as elsewhere in Indonesia, people enjoy the gift of gab, and can discuss problems of great or little import for hours on end. We turned in while the discussion was still going strong.

Luckily the bupati himself turned up in the middle of the night, and the next morning everything was straightened out. We indeed did start for Tamiang Lajang. We motored down the Barito to Kelanis (located on the east bank between the rivers Napu and Patai)⁽³⁾ In Kelanis we picked up a pilot, a necessity at this time of year. Because of seasonal flooding the Patai is just one large lake with trees growing out of it, followed, farther upstream, by marshes in which the channel becomes hopelessly lost if you don't know the way. About two in the afternoon we arrived at Magantis, having seen very few signs of life other than the bird variety along the way. In Magantis we found that a foot bridge had been built across the river, so that further progress by water was barred. Magantis is only two kilometers, a fifteen minute walk, from Tamiang Lajang, but there was much discussion between our boatmen and the pambakal (village headman) as to whether we should go on by foot, or wait for a Jeep to come from Tamiang Lajang to pick us up. We could foresee a long wait in this eventuality, and argued strongly in favor of walking. Luckily Al had packed the little gear we brought along in an old army pack so that there would be little difficulty in carrying it. The local inhabitants, who had gathered to watch these strange goings-on, were amazed that Americans could walk at all. We felt a certain satisfaction when incredulous murmurs turned to cries of surprise as Al threw on the pack and we started trekking up the road. This maneuver brought us to Tamiang Lajang in short order, and we were soon ensconced in the rest house which the bupati maintains there.

Tamiang Lajang is a good sized town of 2,529 souls (1961 census). It centers on a large pasar area (used only once a week) and spreads for some distance along the road that connects it with Ampah, to the north, and Kelua, to the east. There are one or two side streets. The population in Tamiang Lajang is predominantly Christian (a church was established by the Barmen Mission there in 1857) with a marked minority of kaharingan ('animist') and Moslem inhabitants. Most of the Moslems come from the Bandar-dominated area of Hulu Sungai, which is to the

(3) See Photograph 1: A small fishing village near Kelanis on a tributary of the Barito, Central Kalimantan.

east in South Kalimantan, and almost all are small tradesmen, though a few work in government offices. The houses of the few Moslem families are all grouped in a small area surrounding the market.

Tamiang Lajang serves as a marketing center for the whole Ma'anjan region. It has a periodic market (every Monday) which draws people from Ampah to the north, Hulu Sungai to the east, and Telang and Tampungit to the west. The town has very little food wealth of its own, but fish and vegetables are brought in from other areas on market day. In addition Tamiang Lajang serves as the collection center for the rubber that is tapped in the area. Also small merchants attend the market, arriving like gypsies in house carts drawn by oxen, to dispense knives, cloth, paper goods, bicycle parts, jewelry and many other hard-to-come-by items.

We spent three nights in Tamiang Lajang, meeting almost everybody and being entertained at night with singing and dancing into the small hours. Whenever visitors of note arrive in a Dajak town or village, they are subjected to an evening of kesenian (lit. 'art'). There will be exhibitions of local dancing and singing, often mixed with the pallid Indonesian national dance djogèd. Sooner or later the observer himself is asked and expected to join in, and the affair often turns into a gruelling all-night marathon. Some itinerant types, like the bupati or the governor, are treated to kesenian night after night but manage to retain their health in spite of it. Others do not fare so well.

On the morning of March 10th Al loaded his pack, and a fairly large procession started off on foot for Telang, 18 kilometers away to the west. The path follows the course of an old Dutch road, which fell into disrepair at the time of the Japanese occupation and has never been rebuilt. As it winds from Tamiang Lajang to Telang via Sarapat and Murutuwu, it is usually quite narrow, often merely a shoulder-width across. At the time of this initial trek, the rainy season was still in full sway, and the trail was frequently under a foot or two of water for as much as a quarter of a mile at a stretch. Where the path wasn't submerged it was treacherously slippery (the soil between Tamiang Lajang and Murutuwu has a wonderful lateritic clay content which I'm sure could be used commercially if the opportunity presented itself; however, in its natural state it is as slippery as a tubful of eels). Luckily we were in extremely good physical condition after two months of "noon-day sun" tennis in Palangka Raja and Bandjarmasin. In fact, except for a few bruised shins, we were stronger than anyone else in the party when we finally reached Telang, five and a half hours later.



In Telang we met the local administrative officer, called the tjamat penghubung (he represents a unit one level lower than normally recognized by the Indonesian bureaucracy). He had only recently been assigned to Telang, although his family originates from there. As yet he did not really have a house of his own, but we shared his quarters, such as they were. Inevitably there was kesenian in the evening, although the quality of the dancing was far superior to what we had witnessed previously in Tamiang Lajang. The following day we looked around the town to find a suitable habitation in which to set up a local anthropologist's office. We were lucky to find a house that had just been built, located close to a white-water spring (all the rivers flow red around here because their tributary waters percolate through vast peat bogs) that never runs dry. The house is actually located in the town of Siong. In earlier days, the towns of Telang and Siong were separated by a kilometer and a half. However, Siong was moved about 1900, after a smallpox and cholera epidemic, so that its center is now only about three-quarters of a kilometer from Telang. In the last fifteen or twenty years a new urban center, consisting of about nineteen buildings, has sprung up between "old" Telang and "old" Siong. The line between Telang and Siong runs through the middle of this center, and our house is located about 40 yards from the Telang boundary.

There was kesenian again on the second night, together with speeches, one of which, delivered by Al in the most pompous style he could muster, seemed to make quite a hit. The dancing went on until four in the morning.

The following day was Tuesday, which is market day in Telang.⁽⁴⁾ We managed to crawl out of bed to look at the market so we could see what was available. We were also honored guests at the inauguration of gotong rojong work on a new balai pengobatan ('medical dispensary'). Then we trudged back to Tamiang Lajang. Al and I and a little old lady of about 60 years were quite strong and arrived back in Tamiang Lajang just before dark. The rest of our party were apparently out of shape and didn't get back for hours. We gained one big concession from the Telang trip. Previously we had been treated like a couple of hothouse orchids who could not find their way across the street without assistance. In Tamiang Lajang, we had even had two armed guards in our front room at night. After we had walked their best into the ground, all that monkey business ceased, and we have not been so bothered since.

Our original plan had been to return to Bandjarmasin by the land route, down the road through Kelua and Amuntai. However, we found that the road between Dja'ar and Kelua was washed out in several places, that one would have to go part way by boat and

(4) See Photograph 2: Fruitsellers at Telang weekly market.

spend the night in Amuntai. In addition we found that a land trip could cost 10,000 rupiah, which was just too much. We decided to go back by the Barito route which would probably cost not more than two or three thousand. The motorboat was not available for our return trip from Magantis, so we were paddled out to Kelanis in a small perahu (canoe) by an old man and his son, a journey of about five and a half hours. (These two paddled the whole way without a single break, and after a short stop in Kelanis, turned right around and started home. It is this sort of work that makes people grow old quickly in the Dajak world.) From Kelanis we caught a passing motorboat and went up to Mengkatip to wait for a "taxi." In Mengkatip we were advised by the wedana that the best way to get our gear up to Telang was to come up the Barito by trading ship to Bengkuang, whence a motorboat could take us right in to Telang, since there was high water at this time of year. The next evening (March 16th) we caught a trading ship that was going down river, and nineteen hours later were disgorged in Bandjarmasin. During our northern journey we had made use of every type of local transportation except the auto (which is seldom used in Central Kalimantan anyway).

Telang, 20 April 1963

Upon our return to Bandjarmasin, we spent several weeks accumulating household supplies--from plates and glasses to tins of Balinese corned beef--and finding transportation upriver. On April 3rd we moved all our gear aboard a trading ship of 200 tons, a tremendous two-storied floating boxcar called the "Barito II."(5) This boat had no power of its own, but was pushed by a small tug. We were able to procure two stalls on the upper story. Our sleeping room had a wooden platform on which we were able to throw our mattresses, so that we were extremely comfortable (except that it was rather hot). On the evening of the 4th we pulled away from the pier and departed Bandjarmasin. However, we didn't get very far. At about two in the morning the engine of our tug went out of commission while we were still only five kilometers from Bandjarmasin. We tied up near a kampung at the edge of the river and waited..and waited.....and waited.

While tied up, we had an opportunity to witness a "dramatic performance," dignified with the name wajang wong, given on the evening before our departure. A mixture of traditional and

(5) See Photograph 3: Double-decker riverboat and tug, at anchor in Bandjarmasin.

modern elements, the play was a great success with the local kampung dwellers. We stayed from ten until about one at night, and finally left because things were getting very repetitious and would probably continue until dawn. The play, which was written by a pompous young man who gave a speech at the beginning, was given in Indonesian with a mixture of Bandjarese. In retrospect, I imagine the young man did not write the dialogue but only created the situations for his actors to improvise their own words. Bandjarese wajang is the object of Javanese scorn, and it seems the Javanese are justified. Costuming, where it existed, consisted of a fancy sequined military jacket, perhaps of early 19th-century design. Most of the characters wore everyday dress. Music was provided by a large gong, a drum and a violin, supplemented by the actors' own singing. Needless to say, there is none of the magic of real gamelan sound. The musical style is strongly influenced by Islam. Most of the elements of traditional wajang are present: the actors dance (their movements seem almost a mockery of Javanese style); there are clowns (although there was only a single clown, he was the most popular player by far); the structure of the play parallels a traditional wajang story. Superimposed upon this are many modern elements: the revolution, the army, the civil service, a modern love scene (which brought the audience into a frenzy, because such things shouldn't be done in public ... and it was made even more hilarious because the heroine was played by a man, the rather effeminate young cook's helper on our boat). There was frequent scoffing about current conditions, particularly economic, but much of this passed over my head.

Repairs were not completed until the evening of April 10th, when we were at last truly under weigh. Our travelling companions were varied: families with the usual mobs of children, on their way upriver; the traders who operated the vessel; the crew; and two cigarette salesmen who were investigating the upriver market. The boat was spacious, with a small deck in the bow of the upper story, and having lived on the boat for a week we were taken as a matter of course. Evenings were filled with card games and comparisons of life in America and Indonesia. Fortunately we were able to eat with the traders who owned the vessel and I didn't have to cook as we went, which is the normal procedure on these boats.

We got to Bengkuang on the 12th of April, spent a mosquito-infested night and then loaded all of our gear, now augmented by two bicycles, into a craft called a keletók (because its inboard motor, which sounds like a chorus of bullfrogs, goes "keletók-keletók-keletók"). There was some doubt as to whether we would be able to make it in to Telang, because during the week

when our tug was being repaired the water level went down, so that our heavily laden boat might go aground. Also the channel, only a couple of feet wide in places, had been blocked in several spots by fallen trees. The water was indeed low, and there were trees in the way. Several times all of us had to get out into the water to pry or heave the boat over or around some obstruction. But we made it through. One hour from Telang we were overtaken by a heavy rain storm that drenched all of us, but most of the gear was kept fairly dry. It was good that we had made our earlier reconnoitering trip, for now everything went quite easily. We arrived in Telang just before dark and were able to move directly into our house, and to unpack fully for the first time in almost a year.